

Appleby Archaeology

At the March meeting of the Appleby Archaeology Group Dr John Todd spoke about Early Christianity in Cumbria from the early 4th century to the arrival of the Normans in 1092. The first known list of churches was in 1292 when 130 were listed. Dr Todd provided evidence to support the idea that at least half of the churches known in 1292 were there before 1092.

He talked of three periods each influenced by a different culture, Roman (c.300-c.600), Anglo Saxon (c.600-c.900) and Viking (c.900-1092) and considered the evidence for Christianity from written records, place names, sculptures and other archaeological remains. He advised that evidence from the lives of saints, except that of St Cuthbert, is not reliable and that holy wells and curvilinear churchyards do not help in dating places of worship.

In 313 Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. A number of written records refer to Christian communities in Britain, including one which tells of three bishops from Britain attending The Council of Arles in 314. In the 5th century there are references to the crushing of pelagianism, a doctrine which denied the catholic concept of original sin, and from the writing of Gildas, a Briton, and Saint Patrick we learn that there was a functioning ecclesiastical hierarchy in the late 5th to mid 6th century. Bede, writing later, records, that at this time there was a large community of monks living south of Chester.

There is good archaeological evidence of 5th and 6th century Christianity from Dumfries and Galloway including stones found at Whithorn and Kirmadine. These stones have markings indicating literacy and Christian beliefs. The Latinus Stone at Whithorn is dated to 450 and the road to the sanctuary there is dated to no later than 500. The number of early Christian sites in this area suggest, to some, that foundations were set up by the pelagianists banished from south of "The Wall".

The evidence in Cumbria is sparse. In Carlisle there is a stone to Flavius Antigonius with an inscription which infers that he was Christian, and a stone with the chi-rho mark was found in Maryport but only an engraving of it remains. The orientation of St Cuthbert's in Carlisle to Blackfriar Street, a main thoroughfare in Roman times, suggests that it stands on the site of a very early church. Place names such as Eccleirigg and Eaglesfield which include derivations of the

Latin ecclesia indicate the site an early church. Dr Todd said that although the evidence for Christianity was sparse there was even less for paganism in the 300 years after the Romans.

From the 600s the Anglo Saxon kingdom of Northumbria was the main influence in Cumbria. In 627 the Northumbrian court is said to have been converted to Christianity by Paulinus but a strong influence was also coming from the religious community on Lindisfarne.

Evidence for Christian communities in Cumbria includes Bede's account of monasteries at Carlisle and Dacre. The archaeology from the Dacre site supports this as the findings point to a literate community living there in Saxon times. Further archaeological evidence is seen in fourteen stones of the 8th and 9th centuries, all of which are associated with churches. The cross at Bewcastle is one of the finest and shows evidence of literacy. The Norse place name Kirby, a settlement by a church, suggests that their settlements grew up around established Anglo Saxon churches. The evidence of this period shows that in some parts of Cumbria there were minsters, communities of priests exercising pastoral care for the inhabitants over a wide area. Examples include Carlisle, Dacre, Kirby Stephen and Kendal.

In the Viking period the evidence comes from crosses, sculptures and architecture. Dr Todd suggested that the Viking's reputation for destroying churches was not entirely justified. There may have been some decay but during this time stone churches appear mainly in the Appleby area. Examples include those at Long Marton, Morland and Orton. The distribution of crosses and other sculptures of this period is widespread in the west and north of Cumbria. The outstanding example is the Gosforth Cross which is intact, and stands where it was originally erected. The iconography on the cross incorporates both Christian and pagan beliefs. The distribution of sculptures and churches points to an increase in local churches.

In conclusion Dr Todd said that the evidence shows that from Roman times Christianity was the faith of at least the rulers of Cumbria and that from the Anglo Saxon period onwards there were a number minsters providing the sacraments backed up by a growing number of local churches whose numbers increased after 900. It is likely that at least half of the 130 churches known in 1292 were in being by 1092.

Dr Todd was given an enthusiastic vote of thanks for his informative and interesting presentation.